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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 001529

SIPDIS

AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN PASS TO AMEMBASSY GRENADA
AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PASS TO AMCONSUL QUEBEC
AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PASS TO AMCONSUL RECIFE
AMEMBASSY BERLIN PASS TO AMCONSUL DUSSELDORF
AMEMBASSY BERLIN PASS TO AMCONSUL LEIPZIG
AMEMBASSY ATHENS PASS TO AMCONSUL THESSALONIKI

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SUBJECT: COLOMBIANS IN VENEZUELA

REF: CARACAS 1517

CLASSIFIED BY: Steuart, ADCM, DOS, FO; REASON: 1.4(D)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Forty years of civil war in Colombia have created a unique situation where four generations of refugees, totaling an estimated 6 million people, call Venezuela home. Colombian expatriates are integrated at every level of Venezuelan society, from casual day laborers to prosperous business owners. In a total population of 26 million, the Colombians represent a significant bloc that, according to some, punished Chavez for his attitude toward Colombian President Uribe in the November 2008 state elections. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Estimates range from 2 -6 million Colombians living in Venezuela. The Colombian government maintains 15 consulates in Venezuela, with multiple offices in the border states of Zulia, Apure and Tachira to provide citizen services. Colombian Consul General Gladys Paez told PolOff that she estimates 3 million legal Colombians in Venezuela and another two to three million who are in the country illegally. Colombian First Secretary Esperanza Torres, in charge of citizen services, told PolOff that only 400,000 Colombians are actually registered with the Embassy. She noted that the multi-million figure includes second generation children who would be eligible for citizenship. Torres also mentioned to PolOff that, while many Colombians who resided on the Venezuelan border with Colombia have returned to Colombia due to the heightened tensions, the number of Colombians traveling to central and eastern Venezuela via human smuggling networks remain steady. RefTel discusses the recent expulsion of 500 Colombian miners from the border region.

¶3. (C) Ligimat Perez, Public Information Officer for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, told PolOff that she estimated some 70% of Colombians come to Venezuela for economic reasons. According to Perez, her office, established in 1991, has 220,000 cases of Colombians who fled to Venezuela for their physical safety in the last ten years. Perez told PolOff that the 220,000 figure was "very conservative" compared to the actual number who left Colombia because of a physical threat.

¶4. (C) In 2003 the Venezuelan government launched Mission Identity, a program to provide national identity cards to low income Venezuelans. The Office for National Identity and Foreigners (ONIDEX) boasted that, in addition to serving these citizens, more than 200,000 foreigners were naturalized in the

first year. Critics complained that Chavez used ONIDEX to pad the voter rolls with freshly nationalized Colombians. (Note: The capture of FARC directorate member Rodrigo Granda in 2004 and Colombian drug kingpin Hermagoras Gonzalez in 2008 with authentic national identity cards lends credence to complaints that cards are issued without due diligence. End Note.)

15. (C) According to Colombian Embassy Press Officer Juan Colorado, the impromptu March 2008 order to send tanks to the Colombian border upset many expatriates in Venezuela. According to Colorado, the 1.5 million Colombians registered to vote in Venezuela expressed their disapproval of Chavez's rhetorical attacks during the November 2008 elections, resulting in the loss of two border states and well as Miranda state and Venezuela's two largest cities to the opposition.

16. (C) Comment: While Chavez's rhetoric against Colombian President Uribe and the Colombian "oligarchy" is strident, both he and the official Venezuelan media have taken the opposite tack with regard to Colombians in Venezuela. Chavez refers to Colombians as "children of Bolivar" and "brothers." The official media has launched a campaign featuring spots with Colombians who say they were forced to flee the violence in their country and expressed their gratitude for the welcome they received in Venezuela. Another media spot had a Venezuelan and a Colombian singing a ballad about the "twinness" of the countries. However, Chavez

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frequently attacks the Colombian upper class and President Uribe with terms like "rancid oligarchs, pitiyanqui and lapdog of the empire." End Comment.
DUDDY